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ABSTRACT

As part of a research project on "Patterns of Successful Assistance in Urban School Programs," this paper presents a case study of an assister's work in a Teacher Growth Program (TGP) at an elementary school in Staten Island, New York. The school has an experienced teaching staff, a supportive principal, a cross-sectional student population which includes upper class, poor, and various ethnic groups. Due to changes in the student population over the years, the teachers face many instructional challenges in their large classes, and the administration and staff agreed to participate in TGP. The program aims to improve schools by helping strong teachers become stronger. Each program center, based at a school, has an assister who organizes and delivers four types of services based on teacher requests: (1) resource materials for curriculum and teaching; (2) individual professional development projects; (3) lunchtime staff development workshops; and (4) after school courses for credit or non-credit. The study found that the assister was well received by teachers and principal. The teachers felt that a more interactive atmosphere had been created by the workshops and meetings. The new materials were found to have spurred the initiation of new projects including a writing program, library renewal, learning centers, and a computer lab. The students were found to be more receptive because of the improved teacher attitudes. The study concludes that the individual assister's personality and skills are paramount for the success of the program. (CG)

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CASE STUDIES OF SUCCESSFUL ASSISTANCE IN URBAN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMS [1]
I. THE TEACHER GROWTH PROGRAM

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INTRODUCTION

"Patterns of Successful Assistance in Urban School Improvement Programs" is a research project conducted by the Center for Policy Research and Teachers College in New York City during 1983-85. Over one hundred interviews were conducted to study three school improvement programs from the perspectives of specific schools (principals, teachers and parents), assisters and their managers. Because of the complex nature of schools, we selected the case study format as the most effective method for conveying a chronology of a successful assister's experiences in a specific school. The chronology shows the dynamics of the assister's work over time; it is not a complete history, but an integrated picture of critical incidents.

This case study of the Teacher Growth Program was based on twelve interviews conducted over a six-month period, with retrospective coverage of the period 1978-84. Two school visits were made to allow ample time for interviews with the principal, union chapter chair and three teachers. Also, observations of the assister were made in lunchtime and after-school workshops and during demonstration lessons in classrooms. The assister was interviewed four times and the program director three times. The raw notes from these interviews and observations were coded, rewritten as summaries by topics, and analyzed for common patterns. The case has been reviewed for accuracy by the program manager and assister.

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[1] Read at the American Educational Research Association meetings, Chicago, April 1985.

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I. BEFORE THE BEGINNING: THE STATE OF THE SCHOOL

A. Background Information. The school in this case study is an elementary school, PS 667,[2] in Staten Island, NY. This school is one of the few schools in NYC with a cross-section of students from upper class to poverty backgrounds. In addition, there is a cross-section of ethnic groups across the SES groups. Overall, the population of about 1000 students has 10-12% Yugoslavian, 30-40% black, 20% Hispanic (2nd and 3rd generation), and a small percent Pakistani and Caucasian. There are 30-34 teachers serving grades K-5, Gates classes, clusters, and special education. The Teacher Growth Program was established in PS 667 in December 1978.

B. Problems and Needs. The school population has changed gradually over the years to have a greater ethnic mix and a larger poverty group. As a result, the teachers meet many instructional challenges in their large classes of 35-38 students. The school climate is described as having always had a positive learning environment, with an experienced teaching staff. The principal has been at this school for seven years and has always been seen as supportive. The student achievement has been stable with about 50% on grade level.

C. Getting Involved with the School Improvement Program. The principal of this school, Tom Singer, had been an active member of the teachers' union before becoming a principal. When the TGP was established, he was readily agreeable to having a assister placed in his school. In addition, the school is conveniently located to the district office, which suggested easy coordination. The union chapter chairperson of the school supported the establishment of a Teacher Growth Program too. With the added challenge of the cross-section of students, the school seemed to be a positive setting for the initiation of a Teacher Growth Program center.

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[2] All names are pseudonyms.

II. THE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

A. Assumptions and General Approach. The assumptions and approach of the Teacher Growth Program are important because they provide a general policy, boundaries, and encouragement for the individual assister's work we shall be describing. The assister is not an isolated entrepreneur making ad hoc interventions, but someone carrying out program policy with teachers in schools.

The Teacher Growth Program has a primary focus on individual teacher improvement. It is not a "deficit based model", but instead, helps strong teachers become stronger. It is the program staff's philosophy that the improvement of individual teachers is the best way to improve a school.

The program provides four types of services based on teacher requests. Each program center, based at a school, has an assister who organizes the services and delivers technical assistance and staff development first-hand to teachers individually and in small groups. The first service is a center of resource materials for curriculum and teaching. Teachers may use materials in the center or check them out. Second, the assister is available to work on an Individual Professional Development (IPD) project with a teacher or a group of teachers. This might include creating curriculum materials or learning new instructional techniques. Third, the assister provides staff development workshops during lunchtime, based on topics identified in a school-wide needs assessment. Finally, the assister organizes and teaches after school courses which teachers may take for either credit or no credit. Each assister usually serves a main school where the center is located and one or more outreach schools which use the center school's facilities.

B. The Assister. Alice Bron was the original assister assigned to this

school, and she started with the very first group of TGP assisters in NYC. Before joining TGP, she had worked 17 years in public schools in teaching and administrative roles, both in elementary and junior high schools. One particular role as a coordinator was described as being very similar to the role of assister.

Prior to entering TGP, she had also completed extensive work in formal education programs, including a BA in Elementary Education, an MA in English and a 6 year certificate in Educational Administration. In addition, she had completed a six week NDEA Institute in reading instruction in 1966.

Given Alice's educational and work experience background, she entered the assister role with many proven skills and a strong knowledge base for assisting teachers.

1. "tremendous organizational skills"; she had taken an idea for a program and led eleven teachers to create and implement the program;
2. classroom teaching experience;
3. strong background in reading instruction, focusing on the Direct Instruction method;
4. extensive knowledge and skill in library and media organization use and program design.

In addition to these entry skills, Alice had also strengthened her skills in the 6 years with TGP. She had taken advantage of the extensive training offered for the assisters during the first 3 years by an external evaluation and assistance agency. It dealt, for example, with entry, consultation, and conferencing skills. Workshops, courses and visitations to other states and countries helped Alice refine skills in teaching writing, social studies, reading and computers. Exchanges with other assisters also contributed to her

knowledge of materials, techniques and programs. Alice is described by the teachers in this school as a "real pro" who seems to have a "spring of ideas that never stops flowing".

III. HOW SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROCEEDED.

A. Entry. In PS 667, the assister's initial entry was fairly smooth and easy. The principal had been an active m ber of the teachers' union efore he became a principal, and he was supportive of the idea when he was first approached. Likewise, the union chapter chairperson was a helpful key advocate and quickly set up an interested site committee to advise Alice. The principal introduced Alice at a faculty meeting in December, 1978. However, she was then left to her own resources to establish rapport with the staff informally.

Alice came to the empty room to start the program and quickly faced the anxiety of getting to know new people. She said that initially some people would just walk in and "check her out". They seemed cautiously fearful and she herself had many "sleepless nights". Problem: How to get teachers to trust a new person and ask for help?

B. Mobilization. In the spring of 1979, the union chapter chairperson and the site committee became Alice's advocates. She first held a wine and cheese party in the empty center to "break the ice" with the staff and to offer a social support service. Every day, she would eat lunch in the teachers' room and blend in with any social discussions. She wanted teachers to see her as a real person. Gradually, trust began to build on both sides.

The first job was to conduct a formal needs assessment to identify teacher requests for workshops and courses. The site committee helped Alice revise a form she drafted to employ a check-off format.

At this same time, Alice was still facing the problems of a center in its early stages: no materials and potentially too many teachers making requests

for her help. Problem: how to locate materials and link them to teachers' needs?

Alice worked quickly with her para to contact publishers to get free samples of materials. Also, she ordered materials with TGP funds, based on topics identified by the needs assessment.

Fortunately, a teacher had been assigned that year to revitalize the school's closed library. Alice made this project a showcase for the school. There was a dearth of materials and the new librarian had no background in library programs or in media. With Alice's strong background, she was able to find extensive resources and to help this teacher design a program around learning centers. She took the teacher to visit another Teacher Growth Program center in the city so she could actually see how learning centers were being used.

Alice soon found the strong teachers in the school coming into the center to get more ideas. Since these teachers were secure and comfortable, Alice was able to use some of their classrooms for demonstrations of new techniques or materials. These initial contacts were key in spreading the word that Alice was non-judgmental and available to serve the needs of teachers. As one teacher said, Alice became a "skilled seducer". She knew how to use a variety of techniques to get a person to ask for help.

C. Implementation. By the fall of 1979, Alice was ready to offer full services from the Teacher Growth Program. Lunchtime workshops were held and an after-school course on Individualized Reading was offered. The site committee met when Alice called a meeting to get their feedback on workshops or courses. Social relationships continued to be a viable method for building teacher's trust and willingness to make requests for Alice's help.

One of Alice's first requests came from a third grade teacher who wanted

help with her reading program. When Alice observed the class, she realized that the primary problem with the reading program was the teacher's weak management skills, in addition to her struggle to understand a new text, Open Court. Alice quickly went into action. She didn't know how to use the text first-hand, so she got a consultant from Open Court to train the teacher and her. At the same time, she began to coach the teacher in classroom management skills. The teacher seemed to make small steps of progress, but there was little consistency. Problem: What is the best way to identify individual needs of teachers?

Since Alice was still involved in training with her peers through the TCP, she often brought this kind of question and case to the group for discussion. Often, other assisters had tried techniques that worked in similar cases and shared their ideas. In this specific instance, Alice decided to videotape the teacher's reading lesson to see what continuing needs could be identified. As she viewed the tape, it was apparent to her that the teacher was trying to improve too many areas at once. Alice realized that she was giving this teacher and others too much help too fast. From this experience, Alice refined her skills in helping ts set individual goals for improvement.

Soon, Alice began to work as a liaison between the teachers and the principal. With her constant efforts to maintain a strong support with the staff, she was seen as a person who really had "the pulse of the school". Since she also had Tom Singer's respect, she was able to use her knowledge of the staff to guide him in directions that the staff saw as beneficial. One example was getting the principal to use funds to buy new books for the Gates Class that hadn't had new books in several years.

One of the strongest impacts on the school during this two-year period was the rapid expansion of lunchtime workshops and after-school courses. As

Alice began to identify teachers in the school, she encouraged them to join her in teaching courses. Each year the needs assessment indicated more interest in courses, and soon Alice could not handle all the needs. The district office did not seem cooperative in efforts to coordinate their staff development with Alice's efforts. Problem: How do you expand staff development without district support?

As part of the TGP program of courses offered through colleges and universities, Alice had developed some excellent contacts with local colleges. She soon found that the colleges were willing to work cooperatively with her to offer courses in the school. Before long, her courses had a strong reputation for being "reality-based" and "offering practical ideas". In addition, she soon had the confidence of college people, and was able to select teachers for the courses from her own school staff. This was a significant step in recognizing the talents of the staff, and the school's image blossomed with the increase in visiting teachers who came from many districts to take courses at PS 667.

D. Institutionalization. By the fall of 1981, the Teacher Growth Program was an established part of the school. Now teachers would also come to Alice to share new ideas they wanted to try and request her help. One example occurred when two teachers convinced the principal to let them set up learning centers, and then went to Alice to get her assistance. The project was successful, and after two years, TGP provided funds for Alice and the teachers to write a booklet on "Setting Up Learning Centers". Documentation of the projects that have developed from Alice's work with teachers has included a series of booklets (How to teach Social Studies, etc.) written to share the ideas with other teachers.

The major project for the last two years has been the establishment of a

writing program in every class. The principal told the faculty in a meeting two years ago that all classes must have a program. Alice has used her own experiences as a writer of children's books to motivate students to want to write more. She teaches lessons to model for teachers and helps the teachers refine their curriculum. The students have shown a strong interest in writing from her efforts and the writing tests in 5th grade have shown improved performance.

In the fall of 1982, Alice, like other TGP specialists, began an outreach program to serve other schools in addition to PS 667 . The teachers in the outreach school use the facilities of the center in PS 667 and attend courses there after school. Recently, some courses have been offered at the second school too. Some of the courses during the last two years have been Early Childhood Curriculum, Teaching Writing, Reading in the Special Education Class, and Computers and Education. The handling of registration for the courses during 1982 was decentralized by TGP, so Alice had additional responsibility for the organization, management and delivery of the courses. Her teachers from PS 667 who teach some of the courses are a big help.

This last year has been quite a challenge. Alice's, unlike most TGP specialists, has had a para, but the para has been out ill the whole year and this leaves many details for Alice to handle. In addition, she has had to move the program to a new room. With these pressures, the time for one-to-one teacher development has been limited. Problem: How to meet the needs of so many teachers with reduced time?

Alice has found that the lunchtime workshops and courses are a good vehicle for grouping individual needs. She is able to work with groups of 10-15 over several weeks. Then individual follow-up takes less time because the groundwork has been laid. At this time the annual needs assessment is only

done with the participants in the courses. Rather than being a general needs survey it is a checklist for topics for courses. It seems that this method meets the needs of the majority.

The program is now established. Teachers know Alice's skills, and they can expect an array of courses to choose from each year. Alice still seeks out a new teacher who may need gradual nurturing and coaching. Sometimes this nurturing process takes several years before the teacher is ready to deal with the real problem. Alice consistently offers support until the teacher is ready. The principal feels that Alice has reached some teachers he thought would never respond.

At this time the school site committee is not very active. They meet about once a year. However, the union chapter chairperson is still a strong support person for Alice. In addition, she has made many personal friends, so the Teacher Growth Program has many advocates.

The chronology of events described above is summarized in the chart on the next page.

IV. SUMMARY CHRONOLOGY

	ENTRY	MOBILIZATION	IMPLEMENTATION	INSTITUTIONALIZATION
SITE COMMITTEE	Dec. 1978 - Advisory group of teachers formed by Union Chapter Chair	Spring 1979 - Committee helped Alice revise form for needs assessment	Fall 1979 - Spring 1981 - Alice calls meetings when she needs to discuss something - gives feedback on lunch-time workshops	Fall 1981 - Spring 1984 - Seldom meets; once a year
KEY TEACHERS	- Union Chapter Chair was very supportive	- Worked through Chapter Chair to establish rapport - ate lunch everyday with teachers - set up library with new librarian - did in class demonstrations	- grade 3 teacher requested help with reading program - 2 teachers requested help with setting up learning centers - projects on individualized reading, computers, classroom management	- Working on brochure on "Learning Centers" with 2 teachers - Key teachers are now teaching after-school courses for assister (including chapter chair)
FULL STAFF	- Principal introduced Alice at faculty meeting - staff cautious - people walked in to room just to check out assister	- Conducted needs assessment to identify topics for workshops and after-school courses - had wine and cheese party in empty room - people walked in to room just to check out assister	- Offered many lunchtime workshops and after-school courses - annual needs assessment with staff - assister trying to give too much help too fast	- Many teachers requested help with writing in classes - lunchtime workshops on computers and writing - many social relationships between teachers and assister
PRINCIPAL	- Had been active in Union as a teacher so his school was approached	- Supported philosophy that teachers must identify own needs and make requests	- Doesn't interfere - Alice networks between principal and teachers	- Writing program mandated by district and principal announced in faculty meeting that all teachers must have writing program
OTHER CHANGE-RELEVANT EVENTS	-School conveniently located near district office -Alice came to an empty room and started program -TGP orientation for assister	- Obtained materials and established a resource center with para's help - strong training for assister provided by TGP	- District not supportive, puts up roadblocks to courses - wrote brochures with teachers describing TGP projects and resources - began collaborating with colleges to provide courses for credit - continued intensive training for assister by TGP - using videotaping of teachers to check assister skills	- Most after-school courses affiliated with a college - began outreach schools and serving teachers from after-school courses -now only does needs assessment with teachers in after school courses - now responsible for registration - program moved to new room, 83-84 - para out sick, 83-84 - limited training by TGP

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V. THE OUTCOMES ACHIEVED

In what ways has this school gained from having a Teacher Growth Program and specifically from having a assister like Alice? The teachers and principal described the benefits with great pride and satisfaction. One site committee representative put it this way, "we have input and we get results; Alice really delivers." All four of the types of program services have been extensively implemented and services are now available for outreach schools. The teachers feel it has given the school "a good image".

The climate of the school for the teachers has changed toward a more interactive atmosphere. Coming together at lunchtime for workshops and meetings in the center to share ideas have brought staff members together who never mixed with each other. They have gained more respect for each other and a closeness with Alice as the one who helps build networks of interaction. In fact, for the first time in the school's history, every teacher in the school came to a social event this spring - it was Alice's surprise birthday party.

Another way that the center has helped the school is through Alice's efforts to bring new materials, techniques and ideas to teachers. Many projects have developed: a writing program, library renewal, learning centers, computer lab, new books and more. Students have a more receptive attitude because teachers feel more stimulated with the continual flow of resources.

The after-chool courses and lunchtime workshops also contribute to the teachers' sense of renewal. They now have a convenient mechanism for continuing their own formal education for college credit or for pursuing a personal interest. As one person said, "it helps the good teachers get better".

Finally, the school has benefitted by the increased awareness of students, teachers and the principal of their own and other's capacities for

learning. Students, particularly in writing, are motivated by Alice's example to be persistent in developing their skills in spite of the realization that good writing is hard work. Teachers are more willing to take risks by trying new techniques. One said, "I'm not afraid to fall on my face." They know Alice is there to give support and they also see her continually trying new things.

The principal feels Alice has reached some teachers who could not be reached by anyone else; even though he regrets that "his hands are tied", because he can't specifically recommend that a teacher work with Alice. He has been able to see promise, though, in teachers who looked weak.

Alice's Teacher Growth Program has become a vital part of the school's life. Many teachers come in each fall now, eager to see what new ideas can be tried. A sense of personal renewal is constantly nurtured and diverse teacher needs are being met.

VI. CONCLUSION

What does this school's story tell us about the important factors in a assister's success? The comprehensive program model of the Teacher Growth Program does provide many avenues for teacher renewal, contributing to the context for success. The advocacy of the teachers' union and the principal's support further strengthen the context. However, these factors are not sufficient.

It seems that the personality and the skills of the assister are the "heart and soul" of the program's success. Her love of learning and her willingness to persist are examples to all with whom she works. She is seen as a colleague who is "always patient, a good listener and never critical".

Likewise, her skills in working with people and helping them to find new interests are evident. She is able to translate research and her own reading into practical classroom techniques and to demonstrate these techniques in the

classroom. She uses many analogies in her presentations to teachers to make the new ideas clear and relevant. Alice is able to diagnose a teacher's real needs from an objective outsider's perspective, and, at other times, to work as an insider in a group of teachers, learning from them. She continually shares her own ideas and develops linkages between teachers to reinforce their exchange of ideas.

The Teacher Growth Program program model is based on the strong belief that increasing the individual strengths of teachers is the primary target for meaningful school improvement. This case study offers a good example of the way one person's enthusiasm for self-renewal can be spread throughout a school. The teachers feel strengthened and there exists a viable program for ongoing renewal.